

To the Members of the House Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Mario Bueno (#165821), who I have known and loved since I met him in 1992 as a thirteen year old freshman in my W. Bloomfield High School Spanish class. Mario would have been my student for all four years of high school,....but he was incarcerated on August 10, 1995 and convicted in 1996 for the shooting death of Samuel James, during a drug deal. Mario was sixteen at the time of this shooting.

Before discussing the adult Mario Bueno, I would ask you to consider the Mario I knew at W. Bloomfield High School. As a freshman, Mario stood out for his positive contributions to class. He frequently shared stories of his Cuban grandfather, who he obviously adored. He had a lively sense of humor and he used it to enrich our class.

As a sophomore, Mario seemed to be going through an identity crisis. He was one of a handful of Hispanics at W. Bloomfield High School, and he seemed to feel that this required him to wear on occasion what I would consider gang-type clothing. Underneath those clothes was the same, sweet Mario who needed to be accepted as he was. He pushed the envelope from time to time, but this is pretty typical of teenage boys.

As a junior, however, Mario's behavior became erratic. He was suspended several times for his involvement in fist-fights. At the time, Mario bragged of his fighting prowess. Mario also skipped a lot of classes that year, and when he did come to class he was extremely tired. I look back now and wonder why I did not suspect Mario's drug-use. I simply held on to the belief that this was a phase he would outgrow. From time to time I would see flashes of the Mario I had met in 1992, and I believed that with time, that Mario would return.

Then came August of 1995. Just weeks before Mario's senior year was to begin, he killed his drug-dealer. I am sure that it didn't seem like reality to him until he pulled the trigger. I am sure he was drugged up at the time, acting on impulse, thinking that this man was about to shoot him. The end result, either way, was tragic. Mario, age sixteen, was responsible for a man's death.

Mario's first reactions were denial, then fear. He was, after all, a confused sixteen year old facing life in prison. He started to read the Bible and pray for help and comfort. I waited and watched to see if this was a phase which would soon pass....but it wasn't. Mario has truly had a spiritual transformation during the past twelve years in prison.

Since 1995 I have seen Mario change from an impulsive teenage to a mature adult. Mario now rejects all forms of violence. Instead, he has become a peacemaker. During his time at Riverside Correctional Facility, Mario facilitated two "Cage your Rage" classes and tried to diffuse situations between inmates which had the potential to become violent.

Also while in prison, Mario has participated in several courses such as Bridge Builders, Conflict Resolution, Substance Abuse Awareness Training, Life Skills, Phase I and I Can Project. Mario hopes to be a mentor for troubled youth upon his release from prison, and I am sure he will bless the lives of all the people who come in contact with him.

Since entering the prison system at age sixteen, Mario has obtained his GED and has earned 59 credits through the Independence and Distant Learning Program at Ohio University. At the moment, Mario's GPA is 3.4. He continues to try to improve himself as the years go by, so that one day, upon his release from prison, he can play a positive role in his community.

I am extremely proud of my dear friend, my student, Mario Bueno. He has become so mature, so truly wise at such a young age – I am filled with awe each time I speak to him. He has become my teacher.

I sincerely believe that Mario Bueno deserves a second chance. The impulsive boy who was dazzled by drugs and violence does not exist any more. In his place is a fine young man who would be a true asset to his community. Mario is the best example of a rehabilitated person. I hope you will consider my words and give Mario Bueno a chance to prove himself outside the prison system. Thank you very much for your attention to my letter.

Sincerely,

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